

TITLE

Portrait of a Catholic Philosopher

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JOURNAL

The Pastoral Review

DATE DEPOSITED

10 January 2020

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Portrait of a Catholic Philosopher

Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe has been described as ‘a giant among women philosophers’ [1], as ‘the greatest English philosopher of her generation’ [2] and as one of the ‘pioneers of a genuine renewal of Catholic thought’ [3]. Even without reference to her gender, her nationality or her religion she was ‘a titan in the world of philosophy’ [4] who was ‘widely recognised as one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century’ [5].

She was born in 1919 in Limerick (while her father was stationed there). From an early age she was educated in Latin and Greek, for her mother was a classics teacher, and in 1937 she went up to Oxford to read Greats. It was while she was in Oxford that she started receiving instruction as a Catholic (at Blackfriars, from the Dominican, Fr Richard Kehoe). She later wrote that this conversion was ‘itself the fruit of reading done from twelve to fifteen’ [6]. Thus, even as a teenager she ‘exhibited a strikingly independent cast of mind’ [7].

On the feast of Corpus Christi 1938 she first met Peter Geach. They were both attending a Corpus Christi procession at the Servite priory at Begbroke. Geach had just been received as a Catholic and she went up to congratulate him. He, under the impression that she was someone else, proposed to her! [8] Whatever the source of the misunderstanding, they soon became devoted to one another and became engaged later that year. They were married in 1941 and, when she died, in 2001, she was attended by her husband of sixty years and by four of their seven children. ‘Her last intentional act was kissing Peter Geach’ [9].

Anscombe and Wittgenstein

From 1942 to 1946 Anscombe was a research student at Cambridge where she started attending the lectures and seminars of Ludwig Wittgenstein. He was at that time the greatest living philosopher but he was notoriously abrasive with female students, being something of a misogynist. Nevertheless, he recognised Anscombe’s striking philosophical talent, and was charmed by her indomitable spirit. He would often refer to her affectionately as ‘old man’.

For her part she found in Wittgenstein liberation from prevalent philosophical ideas. Nevertheless she was not a ‘Wittgensteinian’ in the sense of someone who saw Wittgenstein as the key to unlock all philosophical problems. She did not grant such a place to any one philosopher. Indeed, she was arguably much more deeply influenced by Aristotle than she was by Wittgenstein.

After she left Cambridge she continued to return regularly to see Wittgenstein and, at his request, introduced him to a ‘non-philosophical priest’, Fr Conrad Peplar from Blackfriars Cambridge. Wittgenstein’s attitude to religion remained enigmatic to the end and it seems in keeping with this that he was unconscious while he received the last rites of the Church. He died with Anscombe and a few other close friends kneeling at his bedside in 1951. Wittgenstein named Anscombe as one of three literary executors and her introduction to his *Tractatus*, and her translation of his *Philosophical Investigations* remain important contributions to philosophy.

Anscombe and C.S. Lewis

The first purely philosophical writing that Anscombe had published was a paper she read at the Socratic club in Oxford in 1947. The paper was a reply to an argument of CS Lewis in his book on *Miracles*. Anscombe did not disagree with Lewis's conclusions but thought his argument was too slick and failed to acknowledge the depths or difficulties of concepts such as 'cause' and 'reason'.

The debate between Lewis and Anscombe at the Socratic club has become legendary. One friend of his, George Sayer called it a 'humiliating experience' for Lewis and reports Lewis as saying 'I shall never write another book of that sort'. Another, Derek Brewer, said that Lewis was 'deeply disturbed' by the encounter and recalled the event 'with real horror'. AN Wilson suggested that this experience drove Lewis to abandon writing popular theology and turn instead to writing the children's stories for which he was to become famous [10].

Anscombe's own recollection of the meeting is quite different. The meeting was 'an occasion of sober discussion of certain quite definite criticisms, which Lewis' rethinking and rewriting [of that chapter of his book] showed he thought were accurate' [11]. She suggests that the dramatic accounts of the humiliation of the great Lewis were more a projection of the feelings of those observers than of Lewis himself. One should also note that, rather than abandoning popular theology, CS Lewis went on five years later to revise his wartime broadcasts as *Mere Christianity*, perhaps his most significant work in this area.

Modern moral philosophy

Anscombe's responsibilities in Oxford in the 1950s involved teaching a variety of subjects, but not ethics, which was taught by Philippa Foot. However, when Foot was unable to teach because of a trip to America, she asked Anscombe to stand in for her. When Anscombe started to prepare by reading the standard works of modern moral philosophy she was appalled. Despite the differences between them, all the writers she consulted shared something in common: there were no actions that they excluded absolutely. This was in stark contrast to the Ten Commandments of the Hebrew Bible, and for that matter, to the teaching of the Stoics, of Aristotle, and of many ancient philosophers.

These reflections formed the basis of Anscombe's 1958 paper 'On modern moral philosophy'. There she characterised as 'consequentialism' the view that there are no acts, no matter how bad, that cannot be justified by the hope of good consequences, or by the fear of bad consequences. If this is true then it is possible to argue that an unjust act, for example procuring the judicial execution of an innocent person, is something that we 'ought' to do. If someone takes this possibility seriously they have radically departed from the traditional understanding of virtue. Of such a person Anscombe says 'I do not want to argue with him; he shows a corrupt mind.' [12]

In addition to attacking consequentialism, the essay criticised the modern use of the terms 'morally wrong' and 'morally right'. The ideas of right and wrong and of the emphatic moral ought draws on a 'law conception of ethics'. Now historically this has been connected to a divine law and a divine legislator. Without such a background it

is questionable whether this idea of moral obligation has real content. Indeed it is precisely because it lacks specific content that someone could imagine that the deliberate execution of an innocent man was 'morally right'. Faced with such a evisceration of moral language Anscombe suggests it is better to do without phrases such as 'morally right', 'morally wrong', 'moral ought' and turn instead to words that describe various virtues and vices like just and courageous or intemperate and foolish.

This essay had a massive impact. It was responsible for breaking the almost unquestioned assumption that there are only two kinds of ethics: deontological ethics (based on rules) and teleological ethics (based on consequences). Anscombe argued for a return to an ethics based on human virtues and on a detailed account of human action and human flourishing. Like many of Anscombe's writings this essay is not an easy read, for it deals with profound questions that lie at the roots of our understanding.

War and murder

Anscombe complained that modern moral philosophers tended to be extremely conventional 'they have nothing in them by which to revolt against the conventional standards of their kind of people; it is impossible that they should be profound.' [13] A good case in point was provided 1956 by the decision of Oxford University to grant an honorary degree to Mr Truman, the man who, as US President, was responsible for the deliberate massacre of hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. She objected to this flattery, but her arguments fell on deaf ears. She forced a vote but her opinion was overwhelmingly rejected. Philippa Foot was exceptional in standing with her.

Of a piece with Anscombe's concern over the slaughter of the mothers and school children of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was her concern over the killing of unborn children. 'Each nation that has "liberal" abortion laws has rapidly become, if it was not already, a nation of murderers.' [14] Conventional acceptance may mask injustice but it cannot justify actions that are themselves unjust. Anscombe's protest against Mr Truman's degree was widely reported at the time, but much less reported were her actions and those of her family in picketing abortion clinics, in the course of which she was arrested and two of her children (More and Tamsin) served time in prison. Such actions discomfort not only the conventional promoters of abortion, but also many of those of us who share her conviction of the dignity of human life from conception, but who do not wish to stand too far outside our own society.

Perhaps the issue which placed Anscombe furthest from her academic colleagues was her opposition to contraception. Those who defend the strategic bombing of civilians within a 'just war' or who promoted legal abortion generally have at least some understanding of why others may object to these practices. They are defended, if at all, as a necessary evil, but not as a positive good. On the other hand, contraception is typically seen as an unalloyed good, taking control of fertility, allowing women to live more fulfilled lives, saving the planet from overpopulation, preventing unwanted pregnancy, preventing abortion. Even if some of these promises have not been fulfilled after decades of contraception, few are willing to concede that there is an inherent moral problem with it. Nevertheless, Anscombe both believed and lived this understanding of sexuality and her arguments remain as an invitation for those who

would live as she lived. Her CTS pamphlet on the subject, originally published in 1975 is still in print. In 2005 a group of students in Princeton formed a society which aims to help students to resist the peer pressure to have sex before marriage, they called it the Anscombe Society.

Intention and double effect

From her earliest writings Anscombe showed an interest in the concept of intention. This an interesting topic in itself but it is also key to many moral questions. In order to judge an action we need to be able to describe it adequately, and this must involve saying what is intended. Anscombe's short book *Intention*, written in 1957, has been described as 'the most important treatment of action since Aristotle.' [15] The book is not explicitly about moral questions, but it is part of the background work Anscombe thought was necessary if we are to think clearly about the goodness and badness of actions.

One of the dangerous errors common to many modern philosophers is the denial that there is any moral difference between foreseen and intended consequences of action. They emphasise the extent of responsibility for *all* consequences of action, including those that are unwanted and unintended. This sounds positive enough, but if it were true then there would be no difference, for example, in taking a job despite the fact that this would upset one's parents and taking the same job precisely in order to upset one's parents. Or to take a more extreme example, there would be no difference between saving two children from a burning building when you realise that you must leave a third child behind, and saving two children by deliberately killing a third child and dividing up her organs.

From such examples it should be clear that what we are aiming at in our actions, what we are trying to achieve, is crucial to the goodness or badness of these actions. 'It is one thing to give a man drugs to ease his pain, knowing that their cumulative effect may kill him before the disease does, and another to poison him intentionally' [16]. It is also important that we weigh up possible unintended consequences of our actions. Nevertheless, side-effects do not stand on an equal footing with what is the aim or the essential means of an action.

In Catholic theology the distinction between foreseen and intended consequences has often been expressed as 'the doctrine of double effect'. Anscombe discussed the doctrine in several of her writings, 'to make an epigram, the corruption of non-Catholic moral thought has consisted in the denial of this doctrine, and the corruption of Catholic thought in the abuse of it' [17]. When Anscombe wrote of the 'abuse' of the doctrine she had in mind the portrayal of double effect as a kind of 'package deal' [18] which provides a simple rule for weighing up side-effects, a kind of calculus of good and bad effects. But in that case 'it becomes obscure why we could not do this where the causation of death was perfectly intentional' [19]. Double effect does not give us a rule for weighing up side effects, rather, it performs the limited but useful task of excluding some actions absolutely.

Writings

As noted above, Anscombe wrote an important introduction to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and provided an unexcelled translation of his *Philosophical Investigations*. She also wrote a groundbreaking book on *Intention*. Her other writings are papers and articles which she edited and published in three volumes in 1981: *Volume I From Parmenides to Wittgenstein*; *Volume II Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*; and *Volume III Ethics, Religion and Politics*. 'A reply to Mr CS Lewis's argument that "naturalism is self-refuting"' is included in Volume II and 'On modern moral philosophy' is in Volume III. 'On modern moral philosophy' is reprinted in a forth volume of her collected papers, edited by her daughter (Mary Geach) and her son-in-law (Luke Gormally) published this year under the title *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G E M Anscombe* [20]

Eccentricities

Elizabeth Anscombe was notoriously eccentric, and especially so by the standards of her time. She referred to herself as Miss Anscombe and never as Mrs Geach. She always wore trousers (even though University regulations at that time required a skirt). She smoked cigars and for some time she affected a monocle. There is a story that once, entering a smart restaurant in Boston, she was told that ladies were not admitted in trousers. She proceeded to take them off. It is also said that, once when she was in Chicago she was accosted by a mugger. She told him that this was no way to treat a visitor. He ended up accompanying her through the neighbourhood and reprimanded her for walking in such a dangerous place.

Most people who knew Elizabeth Anscombe have anecdotes and, if some are exaggerated, others are certainly true to life. What they show is a personality who both cared immensely for profound truths which conventional modern society often neglects and cared little for the niceties with which conventional modern society is overly concerned. She was thus a witness to the topsy-turvy character of much of what passes for conventional morality and, in this sense, a true radical. In the words of another distinguished philosopher, not only was Anscombe one of 'the most remarkable thinkers of the 20th century... she was also a very remarkable human being' [21].

[1] Mary Warnock quoted by J. Haldane 2001. 'Elizabeth Anscombe' *The Herald* (Glasgow) 9 January 2001, p. 28.

[2] O'Grady, J. 2001. 'Obituary: Elizabeth Anscombe' *The Guardian* 11 January 2001, Guardian Leader Pages, p. 26.

[3] Daly, C. 'Foreword' in L. Gormally, ed. 1994. *Moral Truth and Moral Tradition: Essays in honour of Peter Geach and Elizabeth Anscombe* Dublin: Four Courts Press, p. viii.

- [4] George, R. 2001. 'Elizabeth Anscombe R.I.P.' *National Review Online Weekend* 3-4 February 2001.
- [5] Dolan, J.M. 2001. 'G. E. M. Anscombe: Living the Truth' *First Things* 113 (May 2001), p. 11.
- [6] Anscombe, G.E.M. 1981. *Collected Philosophical Papers Volume II: Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p. vii.
- [7] Gormally 1994, p.1.
- [8] Improbable as this story may seem, it was related to me by Geach in the presence of Anscombe.
- [9] O'Grady 2001, p. 26.
- [10] Dolan 2001, p. 11.
- [11] *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*, p. x..
- [12] Anscombe, GEM 1981. *Collected Philosophical Papers Volume III: Ethics, Religion and Politics* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p. 40.
- [13] *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, p. 36.
- [14] Anscombe, GEM (M Geach and L Gormally eds) 2005. *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G E M Anscombe* St Andrews, UK: Imprint Academic, p. 73.
- [15] Donald Davidson quoted by Dolan 2001, p. 12.
- [16] *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, p.248.
- [17] *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, p. 247.
- [18] *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, p. 222.
- [19] *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, p. 224.
- [20] This volume is reviewed in the present issue of the *Pastoral Review* and provided the occasion for a reflection on her life.
- [21] Teichman, J. 2001. 'Obituary: Professor G. E. M. Anscombe' *The Independent* (London) 10 January 2001, Obituaries, p. 6.